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Fell Rains

August 12, 2009 in [Tales from Taiwan](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [2 comments](#)



The people of southern Taiwan are suffering the ravages of the worst flooding to hit the island in 50 years. This tragedy was brought about by Typhoon Morakot, which combined with a tropical depression near the Philippines to produce a blob of tropical moisture nearly 1,000 kilometers in diameter that dumped between 6-7 FEET of rain on Taiwan's southern regions from August 7-9, 2009, with the most severe rainfall occurring on August 8 (Taiwanese Father's Day or 八八(爸爸)節). The resulting floodwaters and mudslides have toppled buildings and buried entire villages. Current casualty figures stand at 103 dead and 45 injured, with hundreds of other people unaccounted for (some reports claim that the authorities have begun to acquire 2,000 body bags). Thousands of other people are homeless.

The areas that have been worst affected encompass the mountains of Nantou, Chiayi, Tainan, Kaohsiung, and Pingtung counties, including many villages that my research assistants and I visited while doing fieldwork for my book about the [Ta-pa-ni Incident](#). Their inhabitants are in many ways least prepared to cope with a disaster of this magnitude. Most are poor or lower middle class wage earners, entrepreneurs and agriculturists, who struggle to scrape out a living from cash crops like bananas, betel nuts, and taro, most of which have been destroyed. Others have profited from the tourism industry, especially hot springs hotels, but these have been washed away. They are also an ethnically diverse group, including numerous Hoklo descendents of migrants from Fujian, but also sizeable percentages of Hakka, Plains Aborigines, and Mountain Aborigines. Through the years, these men and women have struggled to overcome the ravages of natural and man-made calamities, and I have never ceased to be amazed by the inner strength they have shown in coping with intense adversity, as well as their willingness to move forward despite the odds against them.

Now those fortunate enough to survive face the prospect of trying to recover after having lost everything. Unlike an earthquake, where people can salvage items that have not been crushed under the rubble, personal possessions that have been drenched in water or mud are utterly unusable. In addition, the flooding has wiped out crops and decimated livestock, with the fouled waters posing the very real risk of sparking outbreaks of contagious diseases. The government is doing its best, but faces the usual problems of inefficiency and competing political agendas. The afflicted regions have the additional misfortune of being in the south, which has long been neglected when it comes time to distribute flood control funds (this represents a longer-term problem of favoring the north over the south or 重北輕南). After Typhoon Nari ravaged northern Taiwan in 2001, for example, effective flood control measures were enacted; the same cannot be said for the south, which has suffered disastrous flooding for years with no sign of relief. It probably does not help that this region is the DPP's last remaining stronghold.

One consolation is that the devastation is bringing out the best in many of Taiwan's citizens. One leading humanitarian group at the forefront of the relief effort is [World Vision Taiwan](#), while the unstinting efforts of Buddhist and Christian groups are especially striking. For example, the Buddhist Compassion Relief Merit Society (Fo jiao Ciji gongdehui 佛教慈濟功德會) has mobilized [15,000 volunteers](#), while Buddha Light Mountain (Foguangshan 佛光山) and Dharma Drum Mountain (Fagushan 法鼓山) are [raising funds](#) and [performing Buddhist services](#) (法會). Members of the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan (台灣基督長老教會) are also busy organizing [relief efforts at the local level](#).



Perhaps even more impressive are the efforts of Taiwan's vibrant [Internet community](#). One group of Netizens has put together a [website](#) providing updates about damage and casualties, with visitors being able to post messages about missing persons or ask for assistance. There is also a section for [donations](#). A [second website](#) contains similar information, but also uses Google Map to help users locate communities in need. Leading citizens are also stepping forward, including the island's most renowned artists and athletes. Yankee pitcher [Wang Chien-ming](#), who comes from Tainan, has made a donation of NT\$2.6 million, while players from Taiwan's own [baseball league](#) (the CPBL), many of whom are southerners, have been active in fund-raising efforts as well.

More is needed. While the disaster has received extensive international news coverage, it will soon begin to fade from memory, while the long and hard recovery is expected to take years. News articles posted on the Taiwan's news websites list many [websites and post office accounts](#) where donors can make contributions. At present, food, clean water, and medical supplies are of the utmost urgency, but the needs of disaster victims will change as time goes on. Let us do what we can, and do our best.